

How Bloody was Mary?



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PLUS SAN FRANCISCO QUAKE FARADAY'S SCIENCE CASTRATED STARS

On the 450th anniversary of the execution of the former Archbishop of Canterbury for his Protestant faith, DAVID LOADES reassesses the reign of Mary I, later dubbed 'bloody Mary' and asks if she fully deserves history's opprobrium

On 21 MARCH 1556, a wet and miserable morning, the 66-year-old former Archdrift of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, was burned alive in the iron ditch at Oxford in front of Trinity College, in what is now Broad Street. The event was dramatic in every sense of the word, presided over by the Queen, attended by the kind of expectant crowd usually reserved for public executions. Cranmer had been expected to recant, and particularly to retract his rejection of the physical presence of Christ in the eucharist (transubstantiation), in which he had already signed a document to that effect. However, having attended in St Mary's Church (near All Souls College in the High Street) immediately prior to his execution to confirm his submission, he sensationally repudiated all such claims. He deserved the Protestant name which he had lived for at least ten years.

His confessors were distraught, the magistrates outraged, and some of the spectators no doubt (secretly) exulted that had looked like being a piece of rather sordid theatre, was instead transformed into a seriousious martyrdom. In a final dramatic gesture the old man insisted on first consigning to the flames the hand which had signed the confession.

The context of this was the religious struggle usually called 'the Reformation', in which the position and theology of the catholic church were challenged by new ideas arising originally from Martin Luther's protest of 1517. Cranmer had been the leader of the English Reformation for over 20 years, and his death made him a symbol of faith and defiance. He had been Archbishop of Canterbury since 1533, and had guided Henry VIII (ruled 1509-47) through his break with the papacy, and the adoption of the English bible. By the end of Henry's life he held explicitly Protestant views on such key issues as justification by faith, and the Eucharistic presence.

At the beginning of Mary I's reign (she ruled 1553-8) he had explicitly rejected the re-adoption of the mass. By the law he

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THE 'BLOODY'

GLORIOUS MARTYRDOM
The burning of Cranmer from the Book of Martyrs. Foxe wrote that Mary would in no wise have given up the death sentence. RIGHT Cranmer in a painting after c.1547

QUEEN

SEVERITY REPROVED
Everard's 14th-century portrait, thought to be of Mary, reflects history's stern image of the Tudor Queen

should not have died because, having been judicially convicted of heresy only once, in 1535, he had recanted. However both Cranmer and the Queen, particularly the latter, were determined to see him dead.

Pole was the son of Margaret, Countess of Salisbury, daughter of George, Duke of Clarence, and consequently the great nephew of King Edward IV (1461-83). He had fought him in the Wars of the Roses, the latter's divorce, had written polemic against him, and been created cardinal in 1536. His family had been destroyed by Henry in revenge, and he had every reason to be bitter against the reformers.

The Book of Martyrs
Moralists reproved Cranmer from the trial's death to which he had been sentenced in 1555 for endorsing Jane Grey's claim to the throne, because he believed his crimes against God to be more significant than his crimes against the state. His recantations, however obtained by his sister and unscrupulous Spanish friars, were published in 1555, and when none appeared in print it was suppressed. "Of her purpose to burn him" as John Foxe sardonically observed, "she would in no wise suffer". We can learn more about the author of the Book of Martyrs (Book of Martyrs) for many details of the persecution. His work was published in 1563 as a defence of the Elizabethan settlement (the 1559 Acts of Supremacy and Uniformity) without his name.

When Cranmer was brought to St Mary's Church, therefore, he had nothing to lose and everything to gain by his gesture. By so doing, of course, he gave a retrospective preface to his executioners. Three days after the event the Venetian ambassador reported to his government: "On Saturday last, the

March 2006 BBC History

40 BBC History March 2006

March 2006 BBC History

41

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